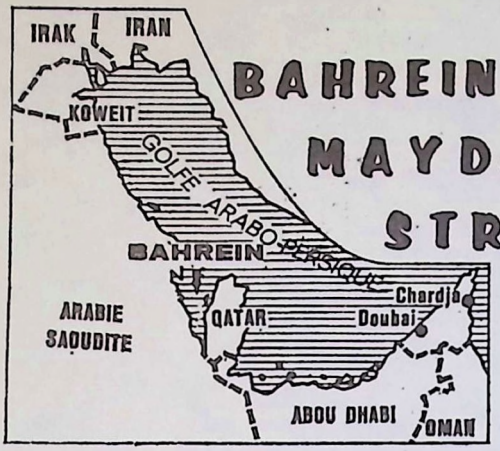

BAHREIN MAYDAY STRIKE

On May 1, a huge workers' procession took place, marching toward the sulfur reduction plant of the BABCO. Workers roamed the streets of Manammah in celebration of May Day (international workers' day). In the morning on May 2, sulfur workers gathered in the plants' halls and refused to work, demanding that May 1 be declared a holiday with full pay. In addition, they raised several other demands for improvement of the deteriorating economic conditions facing them, such as:

1) Wage increase of 16.5 percent in view of the high cost of living and rising food prices.

2) Inclusion of two hours' transportation time within the working day, with salary for these two hours.

3) Increased safety precautions for workers and increased compensation for those who have been injured at the work-place.

4) An end to dismissals without warning or proper reasons.

5) Consideration of holidays and Fridays as workdays with two additional hours.

As a result of the workers' insistence upon continuing the strike, the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare sent its representative (Abdul Rahman Al-darwish) to meet with employers' representatives (Abdul Hadi Al-afu, Abdullah ibn Nasa, and others) and a four-person committee representing the workers. Negotiations between the three parties began.

On the following day, workers returned to work pending the response of the Ministry of Labor to the demands which they had raised. The Ministry's reply came after a long delay on May 8. All demands except those pertaining to safety precautions were flatly rejected, and the Ministry said that these could be discussed. Consequently, the workers renewed the strike. The sulfur reduction plant issued a circular calling for suspension of work until relationships between workers and management could be rectified.

On the morning of May 9, workers waited for vehicles to go to the plant, but they waited in vain. On the following day, they went to the offices of the contractors, where the contracting company gave them their back wages and dismissed them. The contractors mentioned a new provision in the labor laws saying: "Anyone who is to work must obtain a new labor card and must sign an agreement not to strike again."

Let us ask how much these contractors get while they do nothing other than serve as a mid-point between the worker and the company. It is no secret that the contractor gets 50-55 percent of the workers' wages in return for providing transportation in open lorries subject to the burning heat of the sun and for providing the safety items that the workers had demanded during their first strike. In a statement to al-Adwha newspaper, one of the contractors (Abdul Hadi Al-afu) said: "We understand the living conditions and are familiar with the rising costs of living and essential foods like sugar, fish, and meat." The contractor Ahmed Mansoor Al-aali told al-Adwha: "The interests of work and safety for the workers do not demand that we neglect this sphere." Why then did the workers strike and raise demands for provision of safety equipment if the contracting company were honest?

The Minister of Labor and Social Welfare, Ibrahim Humaidan, told the newspaper: "We do not agree with dismissal of the workers under law. The workers can raise their grievances to the employer and then to the Ministry." Does the Minister really believe that the peak of democracy and justice exists in this matter in Bahrain? Moreover, he claimed that the workers were not right in demanding a wage increase due to the high cost of living. He said: "Their wages are good and reasonable and conform to the nature of the work and the number of workers."

The reaction of the sulfur reduction company to this strike was to grant workers who returned to work on its terms a ten percent raise taking effect on May 12. This maneuver serves to punish those who took part in the strike and had been dismissed from their jobs.

Adapted from Saut-al-thawra, weekly bulletin of the People's Front for Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf, June 2, 1973.